

TOO GROSS FOR COMFORT

Behind Nightmare 3's Grisly Special Effects

BY STEVEN GRANT

Start with a nightmare, the kind a child might have—familiar settings that have become distorted and alien. A young girl walks into a suburban living room, uncertain how she arrived. The cheerless room contains almost no furniture.

Slowly, beneath the rug, stretched out across the floor, something forms and begins to ripple toward her. Her first impulse is to run, but there is nowhere to go. The entire room is bathed in pale, unnatural light.

The serpentine form arcs around her, then moves to the

Freddy Krueger, star demon of the 'Nightmare on Elm Street' series, takes on numerous forms.



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edge of the rug and travels up the wall, still hidden from her view. The once-sturdy wall buckles and bulges as the wormlike thing passes through it. Suddenly, it swerves downward and vanishes into the floor.

The girl stands alone, shaken and bewildered. Without warning, the floor shatters and a huge worm with the head of a madman surges up into the room. Slick with ooze, it swallows her up. As she is sucked into the monstrous maw, leaving only her head and shoulders visible, she screams and screams for help.

You want to put that on film? You need a script, actors and a director. But that isn't enough. If you want such amazing images to live on film, you need something else. You need special effects.

The film industry, of course, has always loved them. Many pictures have been defined by their special effects, and at least a couple (*The Stunt Man*, *F/X*) center on them. Science fiction and horror both depend on cinematic trickery; the action-adventure genre is becoming increasingly reliant on it as well. Once little more than explosions and clay figures moving in stop-action, what constitutes special effects has vastly broadened while the discipline has splintered, creating a new breed of specialists in Hollywood.

These specialists are the wizards who help films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: The Dream Warriors* stay in the game. Major studio films like *The Last Starfighter* and *Poltergeist* have huge budgets that enable them to push the cutting edge of technology while small films, like the *Elm Street* series, are filmed on a comparative shoestring. But audiences, and scripts, still call for effects that are more and more elaborate. *Nightmare 3* alone required people to be swallowed into chairs, monsters to sprout from TV sets, wheelchairs to transform into grand guignol torture implements and the walls and floor of an entire room to come alive. The responsibility for supplying such lurid hocus-pocus falls to people like Peter Chesney and Kevin Yagher.

"People call me up and say, 'You do makeup, right? You do special effects, too?'" Kevin Yagher marvels, "No matter how many times you tell them, many producers and directors don't even realize what you do. It's a strange category called special makeup effects. Makeup artists have lapped over into prosthetics. I had to learn how to sculpt. It started with masks and mobile masks and now it includes puppets and other things." Obsessed with monster makeup since his childhood in Ohio, Yagher corresponded with renowned makeup artist Dick Smith. He later moved to California to work with Smith and went on to apprentice under top effects pros Tom Savini and Stan Winston before going on his own with *Nightmare 3*. He's also worked on such films as *Cocoon*, *Fuzzbucket* and *Invaders from Mars*.



The many faces of Freddy Krueger. Touching up Robert Englund's prosthetic mask (above left), a model of the 'chest children' (above right), Kevin Yagher testing the facial controls on one of the scale models (right), a full-size snake (facing page) and the finished snake doing its worst to Patricia Arquette (bottom).



BIRTH OF THE BEAST

The realization of the Freddy snake began with Yagher. After discussions with the film's director and producer, he sketched out notions for what the monster should look like. A pure snake form was rejected in favor of a fleshier, more organic, worm-like creature. From the sketches, Yagher did a scale-model mock-up of the effect. The full scene was then turned over to artist Peter Von Scholly for storyboarding, essentially visualizing it in comic strip panels.

Once the design was completed, Yagher built the snake—actually, five snakes of varying sizes, all bearing the familiar Freddy Krueger face. Yagher is the expert on that particular visage, as he also applies it daily to actor Robert Englund while shooting is in progress. "There are nine pieces of his face that fit together like a puzzle," explains Yagher. "Every night we throw them away and I have to bake a new set. We have to prepaint them to save time, and glue them on his face the next morning. We had 15 sets ready, but had to put the face on 30 times." In addition, Yagher built nearly a dozen Freddy heads for the production.

Special effects makeup people must not only ensure that a character like Freddy Krueger looks the same from shoot to shoot, but also that anything with Freddy's notorious face—like the snake—moves as well as looks like him. "The snake took the



"The snake took ten weeks to do. A lot of people didn't think it would work."

whole ten weeks of pre-production and the shooting schedule to do. The head is radio controlled, and a lot of the features can't be seen, because the slime hides them. We did the head and all the facial and eye movements out of the shop here. I designed the gobbling head shot [where it chews on Kristen]. A lot of people didn't think it would work. We pulled it off her, chomping and moving all the expressions in reverse."

With Yagher handling the snake's visual appearance, Peter Chesney was called on to make it work. "This was the most difficult show for me to date," Yagher admits, "because of lapping over with Peter and dealing with his company. We worked together on the snake and the TV. Coordinating measurements and schedules [during the six-week shoot] was a logistical nightmare."

While Yagher views his work as a specialty, Chesney—whose Image Engineering Inc. has handled special mechanical effects on *The Osterman Weekend*, *Iron Eagle*, *Sid & Nancy*, *Raising Arizona* and numerous other film and television projects—refers to himself as "a generalist. We have to know a little about everything, and there's no time to know a lot about anything. We try to specialize in hard mechanics and atmospherics that require machining, just because in the mid- and lower-budget field, there aren't a lot of companies people can go to." Unlike Yagher, Chesney had no long-standing



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love of either horror or movies, but was in house construction in North Carolina when he visited California and his future brother-in-law, who was working on a film called *The Winds of Kitty Hawk*. Chesney was hooked, and his week's vacation is now in its ninth year.

Chesney describes the complexity of his role in the snake scene: "It took a lot of thinking. Anyone could do it with a lot of money, but we had neither time nor money. Kevin built the face structure and the

head and the movement in the head, and we dealt with the larger body structure. You work out the action ahead of time so you can design for it. Some of the snake's movements were designed for very simple puppeteering. We treated it as a large puppet, because doing a full hydraulic or pneumatic on that scale was beyond the budget. So we used the snake to hide hardware.

"The sequence is broken into eight specific designs—to run under the carpet, to go up the wall, to grab the actress for the

first two or three feet, to grab the stuntgirl and take her the other eight or nine feet and drop her on her back, to handle the snake swallowing the girl, one for the snake to recognize the girl who enters the room, another to handle the snake hitting the door, and then literally a big tree log to swing from the rafter and break the door, with several air cannons to accent it. Since everything moved very fast, we designed to the framing angle of the storyboards.

"We had two snake mechanisms: the one in the floor, which left the area, and the one in the wall. We had a real problem because we were dealing with curvature in three dimensions, taking it up, making it bend to the left, and then crossing a corner of the room and keeping it going. We were going to build a track and pull [the snake] with a cable. But the cable, with its pulleys and guides, kept crossing the space and the track supports.

"The solution was to build a 50-foot run and a 50-foot snake. We grabbed the snake by the head and just pulled it through. We used large amounts of breakaway plaster. We had a set for the snake to come up through the floor at different heights from the other one, so we had to keep in continuity and move the broken walls from one set to the other. It got real wild."

The broken walls litter a soundstage in downtown Los Angeles on the last day of shooting. Fortunately, we're being allowed to watch the climax of the scene being shot, on a specially-built stage on 10-foot stilts. On top of the structure, actress Patricia Arquette stands in the living room, while underneath Chesney has built a crane that will push one of Yagher's snake heads through the set floor. The scene takes most of a morning to set up.

When all is in place and ready to roll, the Freddy snake rips through the floor, swallowing Arquette up to the knees. The director yells "Cut!" The shot has lasted less than five seconds. In total, the whole snake sequence lasts less than three minutes, but it provides the film's most unsettling and memorable image.

A Nightmare on Elm Street 3 opened in theaters this past February and will hit video stores in August. Critics who trounced it as a film nonetheless almost universally praised the special effects, a small triumph over the high-tech films coming from major studios. But in an industry increasingly under the spell of computer graphics and laser effects, is there really a future for low- to mid-budget special effects?

Chesney suspects there is. "Optical effects—stop-motion work, go-motion work—are all getting better. It's hard to guess where special effects are going, what new technologies will be created. It'll be a brand new world in 10 years. The trick," he reckons, "is to adapt, and stay current."

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